

“To what extent is the feud responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?”

## English Coursework - Shakespeare Essay

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Romeo and Juliet is a Shakespearean tragedy<sup>1</sup> set in Verona during the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, around when the play was written. The two eponymous characters are 'star cross'd lovers' caught up in a feud between their two families. Ultimately, the play ends in their deaths, with several entwined plots enveloping the main stage – which is where this essay picks up. The aim of this document is to broaden the scope of the perceived meaning of the outcome Romeo and Juliet befell and answer the question 'To what extent is the feud responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?'

### Historical Background

Romeo and Juliet was written by Shakespeare in the region of 1594-1595 and is thought of as an experimental piece written to test new ideas on the stage. Until recently, 20th century critics described it as “immature” and lacking in the “psychological subtlety” of Shakespeare's later tragedies. However, Romeo and Juliet is now considered one of Shakespeare's greatest plays, judged by its acceptance and reputation as the greatest love story ever conceived. Its influence has spawned numerous gimmicks, including Baz Luhrmann's film set in modern Verona. Though the plot hardly breaks any new ground, the “star cross'd lovers” story is as old as time itself, the twists and turns make the story exciting and provoke thought from the audience. Many hints are made as to the ending by



several characters, Friar Lawrence is one, and the plot weaves itself around a central point as found in all of Shakespeare's tragedies; the dramatic high point. This change in tone starts at the end of Act 2 (Scene 6), where Romeo and Juliet are married. After the end of this scene, their luck runs out and things go downhill from there. This also happens in *Macbeth*, where the dramatic

high point is also at the end of Act 2 (Scene 4).

When Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet, he intended it to be performed

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<sup>1</sup> A tragedy in the Shakespearean sense is a template that must be followed by a playwright; that the main characters (there is usually two parallel, or more than one, characters) die at the climax and that calm is restored to the environment afterwards. In the case of Romeo and Juliet, the eponymous characters commit suicide and the feud ends.

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on stage only, hence the screenplay being published several years after his death. This means that certain aspects of the play can only be truly appreciated when acted rather than read. For example, the stage directions in the written Romeo and Juliet are scarce, with only an '*Enter*' and '*Exeunt*' for each scene. However, with a stage to work with, the director has time to plan his own stage directions, thus creating a fuller experience than can be claimed while reading the screenplay. Unfortunately, little is known of how Romeo and Juliet was performed on stage in Shakespeare's time. What we do know is that the Globe Theatre, of 'thrust theatre' type, where the audience is seated on three sides of the stage, had no roof, was made predominately out of wood, and only performed during daylight hours as there was a lack of lighting due to the great risk of fire in the wooden theatre. The Globe was one of the few theatres in England, and for a period was the largest. Many of Shakespeare's plays were first performed in the Globe, including Romeo and Juliet.

We talk of “Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet”, though it is actually based upon a narrative poem written by Arthur Brooke, another English poet. '*The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet*' was written in 1562, though it is thought of as a vastly inferior piece. In Shakespeare's 'cover', the time scale is dramatically reduced, taking in total four days, as well as the whole play enlivened and given dramatic colour. Shakespeare also gave depth and ambiguity. Was the recurrent term 'Fortune' a poetic term for fluke or chance, or was it meant in a deeper sense, such as 'destiny'?

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To understand the way in which Shakespeare meant for Romeo and Juliet to meet their doom, we must enquire into the literal 'brain' of certain main characters. I will explain; for each character Shakespeare created he also realised a psychological time-line inside each character's head, bearing conscience, a sense of good and evil<sup>2</sup>, foresight and common sense, and a relation to all other characters, depending on whether the character is liked or disliked, prosperous or poor, and most importantly of all, being treated fairly. In the case of Juliet's Nurse, for example, her literal personality allows her to have sympathetic feelings towards Romeo and Juliet, thus needing a conscience. However, the Nurse dearly lacks foresight, for she fails to notice the obvious signs towards the ill-fated destiny of the “star cross'd lovers”.

There are several characters in Romeo and Juliet that play a more significant part in

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2 Conscience and a sense of good and evil are not the same item. To have conscience is to know the fundamental attitudes of fair play, respect, and loyalty, whereas a sense of good and evil is far more basic in that it governs only a character's balance within a world. For example, Tybalt's Good-vs-Evil scale would read closer to evil than good.

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the outcome of the play, some inadvertently and some with purpose. In my opinion, Tybalt and his parallel Mercutio play the biggest parts in Romeo and Juliet's death. Another character that has a major influence on the conclusion is Lord Capulet, who twice steered the course of the play in a senseless way, firstly by allowing Romeo to appear at a Capulet-exclusive party, and secondly by forcing Juliet to marry Paris. Though these two acts have a large effect on the outcome, Tybalt and Mercutio certainly win hands down. To speak generally, Tybalt sees the feud as a livelihood, something that, if concluded, will not continue to provide endless entertainment. Mercutio, though making no attempt to steer clear of the feud (“By my heel I care not”<sup>3</sup>), also enjoys the constant fun and games involved. It is this careless fulfilment partaken by these two characters, as well as others, that causes the feud to cease only after a dreadful conclusion: the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. For this reason, Tybalt and Mercutio are the main culprits, although there are many others.

Lord Capulet, for example, is only specifically to blame for the deaths of the eponymous characters, having forced Juliet to marry Paris. Shakespeare could have used any other three dimensional character to bear influence upon the lovers, the fact that he chose Lord Capulet is irrelevant. We already know that something is going to happen that will result in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, so therefore the specific character that enacts the inevitable is not solely to blame for the outcome. In fact, referring to the previous paragraph, the characters that have an indirect effect are more to blame than those who have a specific action to their name, i.e. Tybalt and Mercutio. However, Lord Capulet is still significantly at fault, though only in a pedantic, silly way that is just an obvious object in time that has an immediate effect, not like the other characters who bear an influence in their own, more global, way.

Another character who has a direct effect, though with good and fair intentions, unlike Lord Capulet, is Friar Lawrence. Being a churchman, Friar Lawrence is looked up to for advice and counselling, which is why he is another character with specific influence on Romeo and Juliet's deaths. It is thanks to his advice, his actions, and his bumbling, however well meant, that disaster occurs. He can be thought of as one of the play's most equivocal characters, however, as from his first entrance onwards, (“The grey-eyed morning smiles on the frowning night ...”<sup>4</sup>) he is the character most in touch with Nature and the natural world. He is humane, knowledgeable and gentle, Romeo's surrogate father (as the Nurse is Juliet's surrogate mother). Everyone treats him with affection and respect – and in this light, when he realizes and proclaims his guilt in the play's final scene, he shares in the lovers' tragedy, and thus the defeat of true love by circumstances is also the

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3 Act 3 Scene 1, Line 45 – Benvolio has just said “By my head, here comes(sic) the Capulets”

4 Act 2 Scene 3, where Romeo asks Friar Lawrence to marry him to Juliet.

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destruction of nature by man made convention.

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We have talked about how Shakespeare intended the characters to individually take effect, but what of the events that led to the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, events that were no specific character's intention to occur, yet happened by 'fate'? These events play a significant part in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, for the play would be ironic in that a storyline based upon 'Fortune' would have characters control everything that happens.

The first fate-influenced event in the play is in Act 1 Scene 5, where Romeo meets Juliet at the Capulet party. Though Lord Capulet plays a large part in Romeo being at the party, it is undoubtedly fate that cause Romeo to single out Juliet from the other girls, and what's more to cause him to fall so deeply in love with her when he had already fallen for “Rosaline's bright eyes”<sup>5</sup>. It is this touch of fate which kick starts the serious side of the play.

However, the straw that broke the camel's back is undoubtedly the miscarriage of Friar Lawrence's letter to Romeo. If only Romeo had received that letter they would both be alive, “if only” being the crucial two words. Of course, it is easy to blame fate, but what if Romeo or Juliet, or both, were at fault? Doesn't it seem likely?

The answer is yes, definitely. The relationship is “too rash, too unadvised, too sudden”<sup>6</sup> - after all, Juliet is only fourteen and Romeo is little older than that. Shakespeare hints to the audience through several different characters the uncertainty, for example Friar Lawrence in Act 2 Scene 3 says “Not in a grave / To lay one in, another out to have”. To the unsuspecting audience member, this may seem innocent, but by using the word 'grave' in the context of Romeo and Juliet marrying, it seems too much of a coincidence to ignore.

However, the times when Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet were extremely sexist. Consider that Juliet is fourteen and her father forces her to marry Paris, a man considerably older than her (it is thought he is in his thirties), for his own self propulsion, an act which would be widely considered sickening and downright wrong if carried out today. This brings up the question “were the *traditions* of the period to blame?”

Probably, though it is, after all, just a play. When considering a fictional world where certain rules are applicable, it is fair to abide to these rules without putting them into the context of current times. It was normal for men to be the dominant species in 16<sup>th</sup> century Verona, and millions of other fourteen year old girls

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5 Act 2 Scene 1, Line 17

6 Act 2 Scene 2, Line 118 – Spoken by Juliet in “The Balcony Scene”

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managed to get married successfully without the problems Romeo and Juliet found.

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The feud itself is not responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. In my opinion, and a very pedantic one, the title question of this essay is badly worded, as it refers to the feud as a person who could possibly bear responsibility. However, a feud is not a person, or a creature that can think for itself, therefore cannot be responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet.

What is the feud? 'The feud' in the sense of Romeo and Juliet is the constant gang-war between the two families of Romeo and Juliet, Montague and Capulet respectively. It is not a character in the play, nor referred to as an external character, such as Roseline.

So suspend your disbelief and think of the feud as a material being, an all seeing eye that also has an effect on the characters in the play. How does the feud affect the twists and turns in the storyline that lead to the eventual deaths of the eponymous characters? And to what extent?

The feud, if thought of as a character, is solely to blame for the the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. If the Montagues and Capulets where not at war, it is likely that Romeo and Juliet would never have met, thus leaving us with a very mediocre play. Which is why Shakespeare included the feud in Romeo and Juliet – to provide tension. The audience knows that Romeo's wooing of Juliet is dangerous, and it provides an element of risk and adrenaline to the whole play. If – notice how this word keeps cropping up – there was no feud and Romeo and Juliet were romancing, it would be boring.

For this reason, the feud is purposefully responsible and was included in the play by Shakespeare as a way of providing pace and dramatic colour to the originally boring Arthur Brooke's *'The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet'*.